

"On Mark Ambient's Henpeckery in 'The Author of *Beltraffio*,'
or How to Keep Up Narratorial Preconceptions"

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"Do you call that being perfect as a mother?"
Ambient asked.
"Yes, from her point of view," [replied Miss
Ambient].

"The Author of *Beltraffio*" 79

In a telling passage of chapter 1, the young first-person narrator of Henry James's "The Author of *Beltraffio*" (1884) notes that the supposedly great writer Mark Ambient fails to react to his wife's hostile disposition, and begins to wonder if he "were perchance henpecked" (63). Though presented as a question and not as a definite conclusion, such a "shocking surmise" (63) is so abhorrent that the narrator immediately suppresses it as if its mere contemplation were some kind of deadly sin.

In this paper I propose to examine the circuitous ways in which the narrator perceives Ambient's alleged henpeckery and at the same time does his best to defuse such perceptions. The experiential data leading him to regard Ambient's behaviour as henpecked are quickly reinterpreted in his mind to reinforce his idealized preconception of Ambient as an arrogant, antisocial, aestheticist writer. The sustained hesitation between what he *perceives* and what he *wishes* he had perceived is at the root of the cognitive structure of this story, and reveals how James's fictional and discursive figures acquire knowledge that enables them to present the reader with a series of images of the narrative world on a varying scale of authoritativeness.

"The Author of *Beltraffio*" was first published in 1884, at a critical point of Henry James's career. *A Portrait of a Lady* (1881) had been acclaimed as the work of a mature, insightful writer; he was much fêted and admired, but his books did not sell. His letters to his publishers during these years were mostly pleas for more money and better terms.¹ There seemed to be a conspiracy to idolize him as a public figure and to ignore his work, and this situation is dramatized in some of his tales of

literary life. In "The Next Time" (1895), for instance, the narrator comments that the reading public had "a moral objection" to acquiring Ray Limbert's books "by subscription or purchase," and that they rather "begged or borrowed or stole, they delegated one of the party perhaps to commit the volumes to memory and repeat them, like the bards of old, to listening multitudes" (330). During the late 1880s, James tried to escape from this impasse by writing a series of novels which, as Marcia Jakobson has shown, are nothing but mediocre imitations of fashionable popular genres—feminist fiction, Civil War romance, working-class drama and so on—which, written as they were in the Jamesian fashion, were destined to be melancholy failures. All this explains why during the same decade James also began a series of tales purporting to be "*small* things on the life and experiences of men of letters" (*Notebooks* 154), in which he portrayed the predicament of the literary creator at odds with the philistine, ignorant public on matters of taste, with publishers on matters of policy, and with both on matters of money or the lack of it.

However, the central theme of "The Author of *Beltraffio*" is not this pecuniary and ethical impasse. It is James's first story about literary life, and a reference point in his canon since much of the story is essay-like in tone, especially the lengthy conversation between the narrator and Mark Ambient on aesthetic issues (86–92). In contrast with most of his tales about the plight of honest artists, "The Author of *Beltraffio*" is a genuine fictionalized primer on the narrative art and the aestheticist creed. Only a few months later he published a non-fictional version of the same beliefs, "The Art of Fiction," in which he developed his mature conception of the novel and a much-celebrated plea for artistic freedom. On December 12, 1884 he wrote to Robert L. Stevenson, "My pages in Longman [*Longman's Magazine*] were simply a plea for liberty" (*Letters* 3: 58), precisely in reference to the progressive obstruction of literary pathways by a priori rules and principles. It is curious to see how in this case literary praxis came before theory.

In "The Author of *Beltraffio*," the narrator is a young American would-be writer who travels to Britain and makes the acquaintance of Mark Ambient, a well-known aestheticist, *fin-de-siècle* novelist, noted for his alleged disregard for moral or religious strictures. The tale is the narrator's account of his short stay in Ambient's cottage in Surrey, in the company of Ambient's wife Beatrice, his son Dolcino, and his sister Gwendolen. A series of conversations with these characters reveals how the narrator gradually becomes aware, to his astonishment, of Beatrice Ambient's abhorrence of the immoral attitudes in her husband's writings, and of the tense struggle between them to win the loyalty of their son Dolcino. Insensitive to her disgust, the narrator insists on praising Ambient's work to his wife, until one day she coldly declares, "I don't take that sort of interest in my husband's proof-sheets. I consider his writings most objectionable!" (83).² Given his boundless admiration for Ambient, the young American is unable to comprehend her composed fury. Drama follows when Dolcino contracts diphtheria and his mother refuses all medical

treatment for him. Dolcino dies, and the narrator is forced to conclude, after hearing Gwendolen's version, that Beatrice had preferred to let her son die rather than have him exposed, in later years, to his father's morally corrupt writings.

The interpretation of the story, however, is much more complex than this apparently simple conflict between art and morality. Written evidence of the germination of the tale as a straightforward moral dilemma is to be found in a notebook entry of March 26, 1884 (57–58). But James is well-known for his tendency to add layers of complication to his original notes, and sometimes considerable mental agility is required to maintain a link between the notebook entry and the finished work, "The Turn of the Screw" (1898) being a clear case in point. In the notebook entry for "The Author of *Beltraffio*," he writes plainly of an "opposition between the narrow, cold, Calvinistic wife, a rigid moralist; and the husband, impregnated—even to morbidness—with the spirit of Italy, the love of beauty, of art, the aesthetic view of life. . ." (57). This duality is at the heart of James's artistic thought, and in "The Art of Fiction" he comes down squarely on the side of art, criticising those who "in our Protestant communities" see only the "vaguely injurious effects" of artistic expression as "opposed in some mysterious manner to morality. . ." (381).

The initial idea for the story, according to the notebooks, came from an anecdote about John Addington Symonds as told by Edmund W. Gosse. Symonds's wife, it would seem, showed the same hostility to his literary efforts as Beatrice would show towards those of Mark Ambient. There are other sources, however. Viola Hopkins Winner, for instance, sees Ambient as a composite figure made up of biographic and artistic features drawn from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Walter Pater, Gustave Flaubert, and James himself; while Samuel F. Pickering also points out James's natural interest in the contemporary aestheticist atmosphere, particularly the impact of his 1869 visit to William Morris and his recent acquaintance with the contrasting pictorial styles of Sir Joshua Reynolds and a group of Pre-Raphaelite artists like John Everett Millais and Edward Burne-Jones, whom he met only two days after his March 1884 notebook entry. Adeline R. Tintner insists on the importance of visual art, citing Walter Pater's essay "Sandro Botticelli" in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, in which he muses on Botticelli's Madonna paintings in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence. All these genetic considerations regarding James's original design for "The Author of *Beltraffio*" are perfectly valid, but when the idea of factualness is introduced in relation to his tales, the function of first-person narration becomes an essential issue.

II

When one studies the attribution of narrative authority to the many epistemic positions created by James in his tales, it is difficult to over-emphasize the

importance of the role played by first-person, dramatized narrators. There is a wide range of critical attitudes towards these narrators, from the idea that they are merely "variations of a narrative method" (Vaid 61), i.e. simple anthropomorphic devices for observing and verbally relaying circumstances and events in the fictionalized world, to the conviction that they are actively involved in plot development and interpersonal reactions (among others, Macnaughton 145, 147, 154). Prima facie they are components of the narrative shell, but much critical effort has been devoted to accounting for many readers' perception that the narrators belong to the core of the fictional world rather than to its outer skin. At times they can even be seen to take over the leading role of the great writers themselves whose tribulations they are supposed to relate.

James himself condemned first-person narration, especially in "the long piece" (*Art of the Novel* 320), where uncontrolled personal effusion can cause severe disorganisation, but also in what Gérard Genette referred to as "autodiegetic narration" (245), a term in classical narratology which defines narrators who tell their own stories, thus assuming the simultaneous roles of "hero and historian" (*Art of the Novel* 320). However, these dangers do not seem to be present in James's tales of literary life. They certainly are not "long pieces," and the narrators never set out formally to tell stories about themselves and, in appearance at least, do not seem to harbour autodiegetic intentions. Their presence and deeds certainly affect the meaning-making process by supplying varying degrees of bias, and even participating in the development of the plot by their own rash behaviour (as seems to be the case in "The Author of *Beltraffio*"), but they do not obviously become self-acknowledged protagonists like Philip Pirrin or Holden Caulfield, whose autodiegetic nature is not in doubt. Some critics, however, have observed autodiegetic behaviour in the narrator of "The Author of *Beltraffio*," since his acts and attitudes may be taken to precipitate the disastrous dénouement of the tale (Kraver 32, 36). Be that as it may, however, it does not seem reasonable to accord him the standing of formal protagonist, except perhaps metaphorically.

This disagreement on first-person narration in James's work is a direct consequence of a phenomenon I have discussed elsewhere with particular regard to his 1894 tale "The Death of the Lion" (Álvarez Amorós, "Attributing Narrative Roles"). It consists of the gradual diminishing of the protagonist's narrative presence as the narrator attracts more and more attention, and could be described as a kind of dissolution of the protagonist's role. It manifests itself in varying degrees—at its highest in "Greville Fane" (1892), "The Coxon Fund" (1894), "John Delavoy" (1898), or "The Real Right Thing" (1899), though for different reasons in each case. In "The Coxon Fund" it is particularly effective, as Frank Saltram and the nameless narrator partake of the same mode of existence and can compete for their share of the limelight. Thus the possibility of choice remains open for James, though he resolutely closes it by hiding Saltram from view even if the latter is constantly

spoken of, sometimes at several removes (Álvarez Amorós, "Reaching Out for Fictional Reality" esp. 80–85). In the other three tales, the main characters—Mrs. Stormer writing as Greville Fane, John Delavoy, and Ashton Doyle—have all died recently, so their capacity for interacting with the narrator is at best limited and even non-existent in literal terms. If we eliminate the stories in which the central characters are dead, a cline indicating degrees of dissolution of the protagonist's role would have "The Coxon Fund" at the high end and "The Author of *Beltraffio*" at the other, with "The Death of the Lion" and "The Next Time" ranking somewhere in between. Textual evidence seems conclusive. Mark Ambient stays firmly in the foreground for most of the story, and his personality is certainly not hidden from the reader. His pronouncements are frequent and reported directly by the narrator, much more so than those of Paraday in "The Death of the Lion." There are lengthy dialogues between Ambient and the dramatized narrator (esp. 71–72 and 86–89) and shorter conversations with all the other characters. There are, therefore, strong arguments in favour of assigning the leading role in "The Author of *Beltraffio*" to Mark Ambient; the narrator's function is rather that of turning what could have been a relatively simple story into a complex intellectual puzzle.

James's habit of using a marginal, dramatized, first-person narrator in most of his writer-hero tales determines the weakening of traditional narrative authority, that is, the power to create unquestionable fictional worlds. The observation of powerful personalities and their actions through the eyes of a marginal actor—especially if he is bewildered by authorial design—produces a kind of epistemic circularity which precludes any external or independent confirmation that the facts have been *correctly* perceived, assessed, and presented to the reader. This effect leads in turn to interpretive uncertainty and relativism, in some way associated to what Anglo-American narratologists have called narrative unreliability. The interplay between character and narrator can be best formulated in terms of Bakhtinian dialogical philosophy. For him, the self is not an independent entity, but only exists in interaction with the other: the former becomes a function of the latter. Consequently, any changes occurring in the other will automatically modify the self. It is not, however, a simple question of perception. It is an ontological issue rather than a phenomenological one, for it is not the *appearance* of an invariant self that alters, but rather its very *essence*. This approach, which in Bakhtin exhibits a sharp social, ethical edge, has a psychological counterpart in the construction of fictional worlds in the narrative of High Modernism and its forerunners like Henry James.³

If we concentrate on James's stories of literary life, we see that the worlds he creates tend to exist only as functions of particular mental stances. In most of the stories, a young, enthusiastic narrator assumes the role of the other and enters into a complex interactive relationship with the alleged great literary figure at the centre of the fictional world, thereby destabilizing his role as the protagonist, providing unwanted support and protection, jeopardizing his literary future, and even

provoking disaster, while at the same time displaying unqualified admiration of his hero's exploits and doing everything for the best.

In literary criticism, however, when the narrator's world-constructing power is unquestionable and unlimited, we come up against an undesirable form of determinism. As the self can only exist in relation to the other, and the other is all-powerful in the construction of the self, it often seems impossible to read around or through the narrator's perception, which we have to accept at face value. One of my collateral intentions in this essay is to show that this deterministic induction of critical passivity need not be absolute. There will be moments in a narrative when the self can be detached from the other, thus facilitating an independent assessment of their respective roles. This can be achieved, for instance, by using the reader's own expectations, mental schemata and world knowledge to judge the probable accuracy of the events portrayed, by contrasting the narrator's gnomic structure of opinion and commentary with the raw factual data he supplies, or, especially in the case of "The Author of *Beltraffio*," by basing our interpretation on the massive dissonance of the narration, though dissonance in itself is no sure antidote against narratorial unreliability (Cohn 29), despite frequent claims to the contrary.

Dissonant narrative is characterized by a clear temporal and judgmental hiatus between the experiencing self (the character) and the telling self (the narrator). Consonant narrative keeps this hiatus at a minimum. If a narrative is to be consonant, the first-person narrator must avoid making retrospective comments, analyses, or judgements on a character's behaviour, as this puts the narrator in a later time-frame, giving him the advantage of age and hindsight. Dissonant narrative contains comment and reflection made by the narrator on his past actions and experiences almost as if they belonged to someone else, and will often use information which would not ordinarily be available to the narrator's purported persona. The contrast between consonant and dissonant narrative was first proposed and developed by Dorrit Cohn in her 1978 book *Transparent Minds* (26–33, 143–61), and—though she never makes this point—is obviously based on the stereotyped idea that "older people know better," which, like so many stereotypes, is often untrue.

Dissonance is only to be expected in a text like "The Author of *Beltraffio*," in which a rueful narrator looks back on the sad circumstances of a weekend in the country and regrets many of the things he said and did. He accuses himself of rashness, but also finds it difficult to define his own responsibility in the events. His version of what happened reads like a therapeutic attempt to salve his own conscience and compensate for his inability to undo what has been done. The signs of dissonance are plentiful, and range from brief flashes of hindsight to longer passages of parenthetical reflection in which the hiatus widens into a gaping chasm. On the very first page (57), the narrator refers to his unwavering admiration for Ambient's work in view of his own "riper judgement," and uses the adverbial

"now" (57) to explicitly clarify the difference between the time of the action and that of the narration. These instances are not isolated. We find expressions like "I wasn't fully aware of it *at the time*, but it lingered in my ear and I *afterwards* understood it," "It came back to me *afterwards* too—the sound of these critical words," "justified by my *afterwards* learning," "Afterwards indeed I knew a trifle better," "I've every reason *now* to know that she [Mrs. Ambient] found me insufferable," "I shall have *still* less gracious things to say *before* I've finished my anecdote," "The impressions I received *at that repast* are present to me *still*," "from motives deplored *when I made them out later*," "Then I suspected, what I *afterwards* definitely knew" (respectively, 62, 62, 63, 64, 70, 74, 75, 78, 97; I have italicized the betraying adverbials). These and many others accompany heavily dissonant reflective and descriptive intrusions, which increase in density and boldness as the tale nears its end. These are a few choice examples:

In looking back upon these first moments of my visit I find it important to avoid the error of appearing to have at all fully measured his [Ambient's] situation from the first or made out the signs of things mastered only *afterwards*. This *later* knowledge throws a *backward* light and makes me forget that . . . Mark Ambient struck me as only enviable. (71; my italics)

I *afterwards* concluded that Miss Ambient wasn't incapable of delivering pleasure from this weird effect, and I *now* believe that reflexion concerned in her having sunk again to her seat with her long lean but not ungraceful arms locked together in an archaic manner on her knees and her mournful eyes addressing me a message of intentness which foreshadowed what I was *subsequently* to suffer. (73; my italics)

My story gives the reader at best so very small a knot to untie that I needn't hope to excite his [the reader's] curiosity by delaying to remark that Mrs. Ambient hated her sister-in-law. This I learned but *later on*, when other matters came to my knowledge. I mention it, however, *at once*, for I shall perhaps not seem to count too much on having beguiled him [the reader] if I say he must promptly have guessed it. (74–75; my italics)

Of course I expose myself to the charge of an attempt to justify by a strained logic after the fact a step which may have been on my part but the fruit of a native want of discretion; and indeed the traceable consequences of that perversity were too lamentable to leave me any desire to trifle with the question. All I can say is that I acted in perfect good faith. . . . (99)

I must be sparing of the minor facts and the *later* emotions of this sojourn . . . and devote but three words to my *subsequent* relations with Ambient. They lasted five years—till his death—and were full of interest, of satisfaction and, I may add, of sadness. The main thing to be said of these years is that I had a secret from him which I guarded to the end. (107; my italics)

In all these passages the writer is doing much more than simply sliding up and down the temporal axis with the help of time-adverbs. He keeps the flow of information well under control (with phrases like “by delaying to remark” or “I must be sparing of the minor facts and later emotions”), justifies his own attitudes at that time (“a native want of discretion” or “perversity”), and makes generous use of proleptic expressions that firmly place the narrator at a high cognitive vantage point, indicating that it will be possible at a later stage to interpret the events he narrates. There is, then, ample evidence of dissonance. But there is more: a half-declared suggestion that tragedy will eventually occur, a feeling transmitted through the creation of an atmosphere of impending doom, and even simple explanations of the strategies he employs in presenting the events to the reader in order to achieve this effect.

If we agree, then, that dissonance is one of the principal characteristics of “The Author of *Beltraffio*,” we now have to decide whether the problem of uncertainty is resolved by the inclusion of cognizant retrospection and whether univocality of meaning is thus achieved. I am convinced that this is not so, for three basic reasons. In the first place, and from an external, non-textual angle, there is wide critical disagreement on the apportionment of ethical responsibility, particularly with reference to the death of Dolcino. For some, Mark Ambient is most to blame, for purposely attacking moral values in his works; for others, his wife is the main culprit, with her Calvinistic attitudes that lead her to prefer Dolcino to die rather than be later exposed to his father’s work; or perhaps Ambient’s sister is mainly responsible, on account of her (possibly) unjustified attacks on her sister-in-law in order to capture the narrator’s attention. It has also been suggested that the narrator himself is the guilty party, because it was he who encouraged Mrs. Ambient to read her husband’s proof-sheets, which evidently hastened the final disaster.⁴ Uncertainty is rife here, and dissonance has done nothing to dispel it.

Secondly, it seems obvious that the stereotype claiming that older people know better does not hold here. The narrator-as-character did not actually expect Dolcino to die at the end of the tale, though the narrator-as-narrator has known all the time that he would. Much of the confusion over the apportionment of blame for his death lies in the fact that we can never be sure if the narrator’s version, based entirely on Miss Ambient’s account of the events, is true. What she tells him is based in turn on what she learns from the nurse and her own surmises, and the horrified narrator, being at the bottom of the cognitive ladder, is in no position to challenge her

account. And it is precisely this account that the narrator uses to judge his own behaviour and that of the other characters. In these circumstances it is difficult to determine whether he really enjoys what Bakhtin would call a "surplus of seeing," that is, a cognitive advantage over the other characters. All the new information communicated to the narrator by Miss Ambient is coloured, moreover, by her own preconceptions. The strongest of these is her belief that Mrs. Ambient loathes her husband's ideas "for the child" (80, 84). This specific loathing is *never* expressed directly by Mrs. Ambient (though she does express her dislike of her husband's work) and originates entirely in the mind of Gwendoline, though Ambient does not seem to ignore it (89–91). The sequence of events is also revealing, for Miss Ambient expresses to the narrator her conviction that her sister-in-law hates Ambient's books because of the effect they might have on Dolcino well before Dolcino's illness is beginning to cause serious anxiety, and, at any rate, before the tragic events of Sunday night.

And thirdly, there is an incongruity in the role of the narrator himself. His knowledge of how and why Dolcino has died—in my view, the crux of the tale—is at best shaky. So his early reference to his "riper judgement" (57) and, especially, his constant claims to knowing better can be read as counterproductive and even downright ironic, since his involvement in the tragedy when he relates the events is far from over and continues to weigh on his mind as a source of moral anguish.

My interpretation of these arguments is that the evident dissonance in "The Author of *Beltraffio*" does not serve to dispel doubts and uncertainties regarding the artistic and moral values contained in the story by establishing the narrator as a reliable source of genuine information. Instead, dissonance is used to capture and maintain the reader's attention, producing a constant awareness that something terrible must eventually happen, and making us eager to know what it is.

III

The aestheticization of reality and the reaccommodation of experiential data to the narrator's mindset are two highly conspicuous phenomena in "The Author of *Beltraffio*." They both evince the characteristic relativism of this tale and in turn derive from the firm interposition of the other in the construction and apprehension of the self. Though closely related at source, these phenomena cannot be described as isomorphic as they do not share the same formal organization. Aestheticized reality is part and parcel of James's own view of art and the novel, or at least of the stereotype generally promoted by critics. James himself nurtured this view with statements like "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance" (*Letters* 4: 770) and "beauty comes with expression . . . expression is creation . . . it [creation] makes the reality" ("Gustave Flaubert" 100), or "If the life about us for the last thirty

years refuses warrant for these examples [Paraday, Limbert or Vereker, his "supersubtle fry"], then so much the worse for that life" (*Art of the Novel* 222). He turns upside-down the mimetic function of art as an imitator of life, assigning artistic significance to even the most prosaic aspects of ordinary existence, transmuting their essence through figurative language: tropes, similes, images, paradoxes, and so on. Critics have taken due note of the aestheticization of reality in "The Author of *Beltraffio*" (Treitel 175), but have never discussed it in terms of its large-scale cognitive structure.

Two pages into this tale, the narrator states that his "visit to Italy had opened [his] eyes to a good many things, but to nothing more than the beauty of certain pages in the work of Mark Ambient [had]" (58). Here the principle that life is subsidiary to art is emphatically established. He candidly admits that Italian art, when apprehended through Ambient's works, leaves a deeper imprint on his consciousness than the real thing does—a kind of second-degree artistic appreciation. This positioning, coming as it does so early in the story, sets up a frame for successive reinforcements in later phases of the tale. For instance, although the narrator is obviously prejudiced against Ambient's sister, he describes her as "medieval" (73) in the complimentary, Pre-Raphaelite sense of the word. She is "consumed with the love of Michael-Angelesque attitudes" (73) and even suggests "a symbolic picture, something akin even to Dürer's *Melancholia*" (73). When he tries to define the impression she makes on her brother's imagination, he can only say that "she made up very well as a Rossetti" (74), while Ambient's wife is said to be "the opposite of a Rossetti," more like "a Reynolds or a Lawrence" (75).

Throughout, we find that the aesthetic temperature is intentionally raised. For instance, Ambient's house in Surrey is simply a "cottage" (61) until it is transmogrified by the narrator's vision into "a cottage glorified and translated . . . a palace of art, on a slightly reduced scale . . . the dearest haunt of the old English *genius loci*" (61). Every part of the cottage is viewed through the prism of the narrator's aesthetic imagination, even the creepers on the walls, which seem to him to be "copied from a masterpiece of one of the pre-Raphaelites" (61). This vision indicates that art comes first and reality second, as he goes on to emphasize: "[i]t was not the picture, the poem, the fictive page, that seemed to me a copy: these things were the originals, and the life of happy and distinguished people was fashioned in their image" (61). He turns Ambient's ordinary cottage into a work of art, way above the dull flow of everyday experience; it fascinates him because of its "general aspect of being painted in water-colours and inhabited by people whose lives would go on in chapters and volumes" (61–62). The whole setting for the story is thus presented as an artistic backdrop almost entirely fabricated by the spellbound narrator.

The aestheticization of reality enters dangerous territory as the tale unfolds. The narrator refers to Ambient's son as that "extraordinary little boy of yours" (71), and Ambient asks why he has used the word "extraordinary." The narrator's answer is

"He's so beautiful, so fascinating. He's like some perfect little work of art" (71). This description of Dolcino confirms what we already know about the narrator's artistic inclinations, but also endangers the boy's relationship with his mother, who would not be so happy to have a "perfect little work of art" for a son. This is intimated by Ambient's immediate reaction: "Oh, don't call him that, or you'll ... you'll ... You'll make his little future very difficult" (71). If we accept Gwendolen's version of events in the sickroom over Sunday night, this previous episode has prepared us for the dramatic climax (106), with Mrs. Ambient holding her son's feverish hand in one of hers, and in the other the proof-sheets of her husband's latest novel—a work of art in each hand, according to the narrator's interpretation—and deciding to let Dolcino die rather than expose him in later years to his father's corrupting work.

There is no serious difficulty in circumventing the narrator's obsession with aestheticizing everything that surrounds Mark Ambient: a whole gamut of intratextual and extratextual conflicting perspectives makes it relatively easy to overcome any circularity or determinism resulting from the dependence of the self on the nature of the other, for several reasons.

First, and most importantly, the narrator's version is challenged from other epistemic positions within the narrative. There is, for instance, a telling dialogue between the narrator and Ambient's wife that follows a pattern of alternating inflation and deflation (66–70): he repeatedly exaggerates her husband's artistic stature and the beauty of the surroundings, while she deflates both with her matter-of-fact answers. When the narrator rather tactlessly relates Ambient's literary prowess to a lyrical image of the house and garden—" [t]he whole impression's that of certain places he has described. Your house is like one of his pictures" (68)—he is brought to earth by a somewhat amused—and realistic—answer: "It's a pleasant little place. There are hundreds like it" (68). Total deflation comes later, when Mrs. Ambient flatly refuses to submit to his aestheticization of their world: "But I don't in the least consider that I'm living in one of his books at all. I shouldn't care for that in the least" (69). This exchange leaves the narrator bewildered, and he becomes even more so when, later in the story, she condemns her husband's writings as morally objectionable.

Secondly, this internal evidence to indicate that the fictional world need not be entirely as the narrator describes it is easily complemented by the reader's own sense of proportion, world knowledge, and previous experience of the narrator's mindset, which by now we are able to judge. Nonetheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that the narrator never explicitly corrects or casts doubt on the presumed transmutation of fictional reality that takes place in the process of telling. There are only a couple of perspective markers in the description of Ambient's home—"to my vision" and "seemed to me" (59, 60)—which might be considered tacit ways of disassociating actuality and biased appearance. On the other hand, however, while the narrator does not openly contradict his own apprehension of reality, he does

permit the leakage of sufficient information from other epistemic positions—mainly that of Mrs. Ambient—which enables the reader to form a reasonable hypothesis of what is going on.

Though basically deriving from the same source, the narrator's manner of reaccommodating experiential data to suit his own stereotypical beliefs actually reverses his method to present an aestheticized version of reality. He no longer tries to construct a beautified world of doubtful existence; rather, he has lucid perceptions, fine insights into Mark Ambient's personality and circumstances, which he himself then proceeds to modify and correct by triggering volitional processes of pseudorational justification in order to preserve the idealized image of his literary hero and his own mental ease. In other words, here the correction itself carries the bias, whereas the original narratorial intuition seems to be a fair picture of Ambient's true character and interpersonal relations.

The narrator's idiosyncratic mentality is the mainspring of his attempts at producing a relativized construction of the self in this narrative. The hypothesis I would like to substantiate here involves his incapacity to distinguish between the realm of life and that of art and behave accordingly. He therefore tends to apply artistic criteria to real-life problems, with disastrous results. The young narrator's peculiar mindset takes on the role of Bakhtinian otherness and turns Mark Ambient into a myth which has to be constantly kept alive lest it crumble to dust before his eyes.

The nameless narrator has known Ambient's works, especially *Beltraffio*, long before he meets the man himself, so his stereotyped image of Ambient as a *poète maudit*—James calls him a poet in his notebook entry for this tale (26)—is firmly implanted in his mind prior to his sojourn in Surrey, and proves impregnable even when confronted with hard fact. The opening paragraphs of "The Author of *Beltraffio*" clearly define his mental disposition: his confessed youth, ignorance, and immaturity, his tone of boundless exultation, his obsession with art for art's sake and its halo of amorality, and his enjoyment of Italy through Ambient's works in spite of his own travels in that country (57–59). This personality provides fertile ground for the cultivation of a dogmatic image of Mark Ambient, an image which after all is consistent with contemporary expectations regarding *fin-de-siècle* decadent artists. In order to fit the stereotype Ambient has to be portrayed as a bold, arrogant, rebellious, nonchalant bohemian, showing contempt for conventional morality and for the affairs of everyday life, possessing the cynical frankness of the heroes of his novels. When Ambient does not show these characteristics—and he seldom does—the narrator feels perplexed, and embarks on the process of disowning his own perceptions and justifying what he sees as glaring weaknesses in the object of his admiration.

The narrator, then, is unable to draw a clear line between life and art, while Ambient, on the other hand, manages to do so very successfully. The young narrator

exhibits the faith and zeal of the convert to the gospel of *fin-de-siècle* art and makes a general mess of things, whereas Ambient keeps the two worlds in watertight compartments. His works may elicit gasps of horror from Victorian society, but he is the perfect Victorian gentleman at table and in his dealings with his neighbours. With his wife he shows unexpected restraint verging on hypocrisy. There are numerous passages in the story that reveal how the indomitable destroyer of moral values that is the Mark Ambient of the novels only exists in the narrator's impressionable mind, and is the result of his incapacity to make a clear distinction between life and art. The tale includes a great deal of factual evidence to show that Ambient, whatever message he might convey in his books, leads the life of a middle-class bourgeois intellectual. He is to be seen "unfolding *The Observer* at the breakfast table" (85), a newspaper that can hardly be regarded as an organ of revolutionary anarchy. In spite of the narrator's persuasive efforts and subsequent disappointment (e.g. 76), Ambient never discusses his work in front of his wife for fear of sparking off a dispute, though he is happy to discourse at length upon his aesthetics behind her back and to ridicule her concept of what a novel should be (91); and when Dolcino is taken ill with diphtheria, Ambient generally submits to his wife's judgement, thereby possibly contributing to the boy's death, as the Monday breakfast scene suggests (107–9). He only rebels twice: first when he manages to see the ailing Dolcino despite his wife's passive resistance (82), and later when he goes out to fetch the doctor when his son's life is past saving (109). On both occasions, however, he is goaded into action by external prompts—in the first case by an exchange of glances with the narrator, in whose eyes he might have read pity if not contempt (81), and in the second by his sister's insistence on the seriousness of the situation (ch. 4, *passim*, esp. 109).

All this may be insufficient to justify speaking of henpeckery proper, but there is certainly no evidence of a masterful, defiant Ambient either. Furthermore, in his letter of April 19, 1883 to James Ripley Osgood, James explains that he envisages an accommodating, conventional author, "a quiet *bourgeois* in his life," who deals with outrageous "Swinburnian" themes in his novels (2: 414), and in the notebook entry for "The Author of *Beltraffio*" Mark Ambient is conceived as being "perfectly decent in life" (25). It is obvious that the stark contrast between the real man and the image projected by his works deeply disturbs the narrator, who has to embark on an awkward process of mental reaccommodation. He would have been spared all this trouble had Wayne C. Booth been available to explain his 20th-century concept of the implied author and the limits of authorial sincerity.⁵

The process of idealization and myth-making that creates Mark Ambient's image in accordance with the narrator's artistic orthodoxy requires more careful scrutiny. In the narrative genre, where different voices, perspectives, and cognitive levels criss-cross and often collide, a precise distinction must be made between the narrow and broader meanings of the term *idealization*. In both there is a counterfactual

component, a kind of incompatibility with the real world. The narrow sense of the word implies, however, that the counterfactual component is emphasized precisely because the process of idealization is undermined or contradicted from other epistemic positions, as in "The Author of *Beltraffio*." Mark Ambient is continually exalted as a mythical figure through representations of his appearance and demeanour, his superior intelligence, his voice, his home and surroundings, his possessions, his beliefs, even the members of his family—with the exception of Gwendolen, whose "good points" are only acknowledged at the very end (111). The narrator is in a state of total intellectual identification with the supposedly great writer; he actually says "for the main points I was essentially, I was quite constitutionally, on Mark Ambient's 'side,'" and declares himself a "fanatic" of the novelist. When Gwendolen asks for his opinion of her brother's theories, he exclaims, "Oh, I guess I agree with them all" (respectively, 78, 84, 94). There is a subtle instance of idealization in the contrasting accounts of Ambient's outward appearance and that of his sister. First comes the description of the writer: "There was a brush of the Bohemian in his fineness; you would easily have guessed his belonging to the artist guild. He was addicted to velvet jackets, to loose shirt-collars, to looking a little *dishevelled*" (60; my italics), where the word "dishevelled" is used in a positive, complimentary sense, to crown an appreciative description of the pure artist, unconstrained by social conventions.⁶ A few pages later, in the presentation of Gwendolen, the *same* key word "dishevelled" is used in its more customary negative sense: she is "crumpled and dishevelled" and is probably "an equivocal joke" in the eyes of her sister-in-law (75).

The narrator's myth is first defiled when, after obtaining Ambient's permission to visit him, he alights from his railway carriage and meets "the great man" (59). He is evidently surprised at Ambient's kindness and cordiality, since he had explicitly expected to find in him "the irritability as well as the dignity of genius" (57). Instead of revising his own perceptions in this particular case, the narrator tries to justify the lack of correspondence between the stereotypical behaviour he expected and what he actually finds. It may, of course, be pure self-interest: Ambient's affability would be most welcome to a young American travelling alone in Europe, would make his stay more enjoyable and would reduce the anxiety of a meeting with the long-anticipated object of his worship. Ambient's hospitable nature therefore perfects his image rather than impairing it. A few pages later the narrator is introduced to Ambient's wife and soon realizes, despite his obtuseness, that a bitter, though externally civilized struggle is taking place between the parents for the spiritual possession of their son Dolcino. Ambient beckons to the child to come to him, but Dolcino is forcibly restrained by his mother. The narrator tries to conceal his surprise that "Mrs. Ambient should pay so little attention to her husband" (63), but a few lines later, when Ambient talks to his wife "without a trace of resentment for the detention of the child," the narrator begins to wonder "if he were perchance

henpecked" (63). This is the initiating moment of the highly revealing mental reaction which was instanced at the beginning of this paper. While there are quite a few moments in the story where Ambient fails to live up to his mythical *persona*, and where the narrator is obliged to explain away his apparent weaknesses in order to defuse all possible threats to the intellectual and affective construction thrust upon his idol, what is really curious is the way in which he applies a coat of rational varnish to explanations that I personally see as a simple strategy of self-reassurance. The simple fact is that a young man whose *raison d'être* is the current version of artistic rebellion cannot digest the ambivalence between Ambient's social acceptability and his radical art.

There are other textual revelations along similar lines. In chapter 1, Mark Ambient describes his house as "a cottage" and the narrator sees "*afterwards* that he was right" (61; my italics). He then realizes that a cottage is too humble a place to contain such greatness and, as we have seen earlier, tries to dignify it: "But it was, *to my vision*, a cottage glorified and translated; it was a palace of art . . ." (61; my italics). Here the key words are "afterwards" and "to my vision": "afterwards" could refer to a later moment in the weekend-long narrative, or could be a mark of narrative dissonance, pointing to a mature narratorial reflection implying a disavowal of his youthful, exalted view of the house. If the second of these meanings is what James intended, he could have reinforced the perspective marker "to my vision" with a temporal determination such as "at that time," but, for some reason, he chose not to do so. Obviously, this example bears out my hypothesis better if "afterwards" is taken in the first meaning, though it should be admitted that this word is a usual mark of dissonance in "The Author of *Beltraffio*," as can be seen in the texts previously discussed.

The narrator is similarly confused by another episode in chapter 1, when Mark Ambient sustains a lively conversation with the vicar's wife on the subject of chrysanthemums. The narrator acknowledges that the subject is harmless enough, but cannot help feeling that an aestheticist writer should not be "even in such superficial communion with the Church of England," and goes on to reflect:

His writings implied so much detachment from that institution, expressed a view of life so profane, as it were, so independent and so little likely in general to be thought edifying, that I should have expected to find him an object of horror to vicars and their ladies—of horror repaid on his own part by any amount of effortless derision. (65)

Where he expects harshness, he finds social conventionalism, but immediately also finds a justification for it, which puts his mind more at ease as well as presenting his hero in an even more favourable light: "This proved how little I knew as yet of the English people and their extraordinary talent for keeping up their forms" (65). It

never even crosses his mind that Ambient might actually derive some pleasure from discussing chrysanthemums with the vicar's wife; he prefers to put it all down to social hypocrisy. In this case, however, he may be right; for later, in the privacy of his study, Ambient draws some "wonderful comparisons for his clerical neighbours" (65). We are never told exactly what these comparisons might be, but, if we read this phrase as an expression of the writer's contempt, a degree of hypocrisy is obviously there. In any case, Ambient's mythical image is soiled: he is either a hypocrite or dangerously tolerant towards the Church of England. The narrator in his idolatry chooses the former as the lesser of the two evils, though, as we shall see later, hypocrisy is a fault he cannot forgive. He tries to accept duplicity by portraying it as good manners, but when he finds that he can no longer disguise it he will do his best to shut it out of his mind altogether.

After dinner on the Saturday, Ambient leads the narrator into his study to smoke and, the narrator hopes, to exchange confidences. This is what he finds: "He liked to talk; he liked to defend his convictions and his honour (not that I attacked them); he liked a little perhaps—it was a pardonable weakness—to bewilder the youthful mind even while wishing to win it over" (77). Once again, the narrator can immediately find extenuating circumstances for anything that looks like a flaw in Ambient's character. This instance is different from others, however, in that no explicit reason is given to explain why this particular "weakness" is "pardonable": it is up to the reader to supply a reason. Not only is the observed blemish on Ambient's character "pardonable"; it is adverbially toned down from the outset—"a little perhaps"—which makes it more amenable to full exoneration.

At the end of chapter 2 there are two more closely related instances of the phenomenon I am trying to illustrate here. On meeting the narrator and Gwendolen downstairs, Mark Ambient confesses that his wife will not let him see Dolcino, and the narrator reacts:

" . . . I'm disappointed. She won't let me in. She has locked the door, and I'm afraid to make a noise." I dare say there might have been a touch of the ridiculous in such a confession, but I liked my new friend so much that it took nothing for me from his dignity. . . .

I had exchanged a glance with Mark in which it's possible he read that my pity for him was untinged with contempt, though I scarce know why he should have cared. . . . (81)

The narrator surreptitiously inserts two telling words here—"ridiculous" and "contempt." Considering Ambient's behaviour and attitudes, these two terms seem fairly appropriate. The feelings behind them, however, are immediately repressed in slightly different ways. In the case of "ridiculous," the suggestion is that the narrator's first intuition was right and that Ambient's confession was really

ridiculous. The narrator's attempt to cover it up with personal affection is thus a wishful, desperate, but ineffectual effort to dismiss his own fears. The case of "contempt" is more elliptic: the narrator emphatically denies that the pity he feels is compounded with disgust, but the very fact that this denial seems necessary makes the contempt, and the fear that Ambient should perceive it, more real.

Two additional instances must be mentioned to support my hypothesis. The first of these occurs in chapter 3, towards the end of Ambient's peripatetic tutorial on aesthetic issues. The narrator finds that Ambient has presented his wife's view of art somewhat meanly:

He [Ambient] told me more about his wife before we arrived at the gate of home, and if he be judged to have aired overmuch his grievance I'm afraid I must admit that he had some of the foibles as well as the gifts of the artistic temperament; adding, however, instantly that hitherto, to the best of my belief, he had rarely let this particular cat out of the bag. (91)

He regrets that Ambient has not shown more restraint in criticizing his wife's opinions behind her back, thus falling from Olympian heights into the bog of ordinary human resentment, but immediately excuses his conduct by paradoxically putting it down to idiosyncrasies of "the artistic temperament," and even reassures himself by reflecting that he was not in the habit of divulging such intimacies. Two pages later Mark Ambient sits at luncheon and treats his wife with the utmost civility after having condemned quite roundly her "hollow . . . dishonest . . . lying" conception of the novelist's art (91). This is the narrator's reaction:

If I had had it in my heart to think my host a little of a hypocrite for appearing to forget at table everything he had said to me in our walk, I should instantly have cancelled such a judgement on reflecting that the good news his wife was able to give him about their little boy was ground enough for any optimistic reaction. (93)

Although the narrator was more or less willing to accept hypocrisy as a valid alternative to connivance with the Church of England, he cannot justify it when the victim is Ambient's wife. We find, then, that Mark Ambient's social behaviour is inconsistent with the doctrine he expounds in his works and tries to inculcate in his disciples, and, from an external perspective, we are forced to wonder whether he is really himself when he shows off his good manners at table, when he discloses his arrogant views to the narrator in private, or perhaps in both roles, for he looks the perfect master at separating art from life. The ingenuous narrator is shocked by the contradiction between Ambient's passionate tirade on the nature of art and his social graces, and can only strive to find plausible excuses, which usually means

construing the experiential data *ad libitum* in order to prop up the myth he himself has created. Art and life, for him, can only be a seamless harmonious whole. In this particular case, he deceives himself once more by trying to believe that Ambient's ideological hostility towards his wife can be transformed into courteous kindness by Dolcino's improved health.

As we have seen in the fragments analyzed above, the qualities that the narrator at first sees as shameful weaknesses in Ambient's character are not really all that outrageous if viewed from a more neutral perspective; the narrator's obsessive need to rationalize or play down these qualities is in fact much more remarkable. His artless sincerity is most helpful in lifting the veil of determinism and circularity, because he systematically discloses the result of his reaccommodation of experience, but also signposts the highly revealing intermediate stages leading to it. In my view, and considering the thorny epistemic problems posed by later writer-hero narratives, James could not have begun this series on a more promising note.⁷

Notes

1. The correspondence between Henry James and Macmillan leaves no room for doubt; see *The Correspondence of Henry James and the House of Macmillan, 1877-1914*. Rayburn S. Moore, the editor of this collection, observes that "the letters discuss business matters primarily," though they also include "greetings to and from Mrs. Macmillan, invitations to dinner or to weekends . . . and . . . bits of literary gossip about mutual friends or acquaintances" (xxv).
2. In the periodical publication of "The Author of *Beltraffio*" in the *English Illustrated Magazine*, Mrs. Ambient's abrupt expression of dislike closes the first installment (573). In my view, this melodramatic closure was obviously intended as a climactic realization of hints scattered throughout the initial part of the tale.
3. For an extended account of how Bakhtin's dialogical thought can illuminate James's novelistic ideas—and vice versa—see Álvarez Amorós, "Henry James and Mikhail Bakhtin on the Art of Fiction."
4. These four opinions are respectively held, among others, by Scoggins, Winner, Freier, and Reiman.
5. For Wayne C. Booth's classical account of the implied author, see his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 67–77.
6. Incidentally, Ambient's dress and external appearance seems to be the only point of coincidence between the narrator's image of an aestheticist writer and the real man.
7. I would like to record my gratitude to Professor Bryn Moody for his expert assistance in turning a preliminary draft of this paper into publishable form. Usual caveats apply, though.

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